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EVENTS

Uber set to offer driverless rides here

Ride-sharing company's first fleet arrives this month

August 19, 2016 12:11 AM



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

A Ford Fusion on display in July at Point State Park was outfitted at Uber's Advance Technologies Center in the Strip District.



By Ed Blazina / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Uber is ready to ratchet up the push for self-driving vehicles.

The ride-hailing company is expected to begin offering rides in self-driving Volvo XC90 SUVs in the Pittsburgh area within a few weeks. In addition, it announced Thursday that it has acquired a company that is testing similar technology for tractor-trailers to use on highways.

Uber is in a race with Google and Detroit automakers such as Ford and General Motors to unleash self-driving vehicles on American roadways. The San Francisco-based company has its Advanced Technologies Center in Pittsburgh's Strip District, where it is planning a large expansion, and is in

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the process of renovating an old railroad roundhouse at the former LTV plant in Hazelwood into a test facility for self-driving vehicles.

But even before those facilities are ready, the company will begin offering rides in self-driving vehicles. The plan was reported by multiple media outlets, but Uber wouldn't give more details Thursday.

"We're really excited about Pittsburgh and will have more to share in the coming days," spokesman Craig Ewer wrote in an email.

Uber's rollout of self-driving vehicles comes as a PennDOT Autonomous Vehicle Task Force still is developing recommendations for laws to cover the testing and operation of self-driving vehicles. Roger Cohen and Kurt Myers, co-chairs of the committee, said Thursday that Uber has been an active participant in the task force and they have no concerns about the company moving forward with self-driving vehicles ahead of the recommendations.

"I don't have a concern that Uber is moving ahead before the task force has finished its recommendations," Mr. Cohen said. "[Uber is] highly sensitive to the issue of safety."

Likewise, the city of Pittsburgh has no concern about Uber moving ahead now "as long as there is a licensed driver behind the wheel, as there will be in the Uber rollout," said Tim McNulty, a spokesman for Mayor Bill Peduto.

Current state transportation law allows self-driving vehicles as long as there is a driver available behind the steering wheel to react to something unexpected and the state has no standing to prevent Uber or any other operator from using a self-driving vehicle as long as that condition is met, they said.

"They are legally within their rights to do this," Mr. Cohen said.

However, the state Public Utility Commission has asked Uber to submit its plans for self-driving vehicles for review, spokesman Nils Hagen-Frederiksen said Thursday. Until the state agency sees the plans, he said, officials won't know whether the plans need PUC approval.

Uber is operating under an experimental authorization from the PUC and has clashed with the agency before for operating without proper state approval.

The PennDOT task force is expected to recommend that in the future anyone testing self-driving vehicles notify PennDOT and provide a general outline of testing plans.

"This technology is coming," Mr. Myers said. "Pennsylvania has made the conscious decision to put rules and regulations in place and the task force will have its recommendations into [Transportation Secretary Leslie Richards] in the fall."

The state's two main goals with the task force re to ensure safety and encourage commercial development of self-driving vehicles in Pennsylvania. In addition to Uber, Carnegie Mellon University is working on a self-driving vehicle with General Motors.

"Pittsburgh has really taken the lead and [Uber's plan] is one more demonstration of that," Mr. Cohen said.

Mr. McNulty agreed.

"Pittsburgh, and in particular Carnegie Mellon University, have been leaders in autonomous vehicle research for decades and this is a logical next step," he said. "We're happy to have developed a

Four Quick Questions

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- Yes
- No

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relationship with Uber, and welcome working with fellow innovative companies, especially those bringing new services to our residents."

Uber's self-stated goal is to have a fleet of self-driving vehicles so it can eliminate drivers. Bill Steigerwald, an Uber driver since January 2015, said he's not concerned the company will eliminate the need for all drivers.

Mr. Steigerwald, of Eighty Four, said Pittsburgh's preponderance of hilly, narrow streets will render vehicles without drivers "not practical in a lot of situations." In addition, a driver can react to situations in ways that a machine can't, such as making eye contact with an Uber customer on a crowded street or letting a passenger out in the middle of a block if that is more convenient.

"[Driverless vehicles] will be a supplement," he said. "They are always going to need human drivers to make decisions."

"Imagine Pittsburgh with all the hollows and rivers and hills. The roads are just insane. If they can send a driverless car up the South Side Slopes or on the narrow streets of Bloomfield, I'll know they have succeeded."

In a related matter, Uber announced Thursday it has acquired Otto, a company formed earlier this year to develop self-driving tractor-trailers, and announced a partnership with Volvo on self-driving SUVs. A group including former Google engineers founded Otto and is testing self-driving trucks in San Francisco.

In a post on the company website called "Rethinking Transportation," Uber co-founder and CEO Travis Kalanick said the acquisition of Otto forms a "dream team" of engineers.

"Together, we now have one of the strongest autonomous engineering groups in the world; self-driving trucks and cars that are already on the road thanks to Otto and Uber's Advanced Technologies Center in Pittsburgh; the practical experience that comes from running ride-sharing and delivery services in hundreds of cities; with the data and intelligence that comes from doing 1.2 billion miles on the road every month," he wrote.

Mr. Kalanick said the company is partnering with Volvo because of the Swedish automaker's long safety record.

"Volvo has consistently been a leader when it comes to safety. And partnership is crucial to our self-driving strategy because Uber has no experience making cars," he wrote.

Ed Blazina: eblazina@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1470.

Question

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4 Comments



James Poirier 194 days ago

New York City's "Ground Zero" is the World Transportation Center (WTC), the point of origin for America's new self-driving-car system.

When you search "World Transportation Center" on the Google Maps app, Manhattan's former World Trade Center (WTC) comes up.

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David Schwartz 202 days ago

I can see Uber's economic inspired desire to use driverless cars, but this whole driverless car phenomenon makes no sense. I always thought that part of the joy of owning/leasing a car, was the fun of driving it.

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0  

 Ion Moon 195 days ago

Nope. For some of us it is just to get from place to place... and if I can do that while reading or something, even better.

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Shawn Chandler 202 days ago

I have zero belief that an automated vehicle can perform any worse in any situation than a human driver.

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